

**Teacher responses to children's spontaneous reactions to differences in their  
classmates with Down Syndrome: Implications for teaching and learning**

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## Teacher responses to children's spontaneous reactions to differences in their classmates with Down Syndrome: Implications for teaching and learning

Belonging as a valued member of the class, irrespective of impairment is critical for optimal socio-emotional and cognitive gains. In classrooms involving children with identifiable impairments such as Down Syndrome (DS), teachers and teacher-aides are faced with the issue of how to explain the child's impairment-related differences when classmates ask questions or comment. This paper which describes a qualitative study based on the data of 3 boys with DS (aged 5-6) entering primary school, investigated the kinds of responses peers made about the children publicly and how their respective teachers and teacher aides responded. The boys, their classmates and teacher/teacher-aides were observed using continuous narrative recordings during their classroom, play and lunchtime activities. Results indicated that there were three distinct categories of teacher/teacher-aide responses and that these were related to qualitative differences in interactions between the child with DS and his classmates. How children learnt to frame the child with DS affected not only their interactions with him, but also the quality of educational learning outcomes for the child with DS. Implications for teachers will be explored.

Belonging as a valued member in a regular classroom is specified frequently as a critical process and outcome for all children (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), but particularly for those with impairments (and other differences) that may place them at increased risk for exclusion (Grenot-Scheyer, 2004; Kunc, 1992). Failure to belong has a number of negative implications for learning and development; developmental processes such as the formation of a healthy self-esteem are likely to be compromised if the child consistently experiences a social context that provides no validation of her/his self-worth. Maslow (1970) and Kunc (1992) (who utilises Maslow's model in his argument for inclusion) argue that if children's fundamental needs are not fulfilled, such as food and shelter, acceptance and belonging, then they are less likely to be able to engage in higher-order learning. Children cannot learn optimally if they are anxious about their environment, if they do not understand what is required of them and they do not have the skills to communicate this due to biological and/or social factors. Such anxiety interferes with optimal learning (Gable & Hunting, 2000) and illustrates the interdependence of biological and contextual factors for children with impairments. Since schools are about the facilitation of learning (Ministry of Education, 2005), children who do not belong as valued members within one or more peer cultures in the classroom are therefore unlikely to fulfil their potential as learners (Nuthall, 2001; Rietveld, 2002). If children do not feel respected and supported by their peers in relation to their identity (Kelly, MacArthur & Sharp, 2004; Rietveld, 2002) or in their engagement with the curriculum, they may disengage from their roles as classroom learners and adopt less desirable roles, such as class clown in order for them to feel successful and hence, included (Connor, 1994; Erickson, 1996). Furthermore, since the core of cognitive activity arises out of social participation with more skilled and responsive others within the child's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), being excluded by peers at school passively or actively will interfere with optimal learning outcomes as supportive peers provide opportunities, motivation, interest, information and encouragement conducive to success (Kollar, Anderson & Palincsar, 1994). Finally, children with and without impairments who do not experience belonging as valued members of the peer culture remain isolated, thus not only depriving each other of potentially enriching relationships, skills and knowledge but also defeating the aims of the Education Act (1989), the New Zealand Disability Strategy (2001) and New Zealand Curriculum Framework (1993), legislation and documents that support an inclusive society.

Positive relationships usually develop when children see commonalities among themselves. Studies indicate that when a newcomer has an identifiable impairment, the process of seeing any similarities with the child may be impeded (Rietveld, 2002; Sinson, 1988; Sinson & Wetherick, 1982). Johnson & Johnson's (1980) explanation for this is that in the absence of meaningful alternative experiences, the newcomer's unfamiliar characteristics are interpreted as all-encompassing, monopolistic and static, thus diverting peers' attention away from the child's actual behaviour on a moment-by-moment basis and from other characteristics that might be present. Thus, without a supportive classroom and school context that facilitates different kinds of mutually satisfying experiences with the newcomer (ones which help children understand the unfamiliar characteristics and see beyond them to other characteristics they can relate to), the child and her/his classmates cannot experience the kind of belonging conducive to their development. This makes sense in view of Vygotsky's theory of learning. Children's learning about diversity including impairments needs to be within their zones of proximal development with meaningful connections being facilitated between their current levels of understandings and more advanced understandings. Since key goals of inclusion involve the valuing of all students as they are and a greater acceptance of and learning about diversity (New Zealand Curriculum Framework, 1993; Minister for Disability Issues, 2001), then it becomes pertinent to examine the kinds of learnings about diversity including impairments that children experience in educational settings and ascertain whether they are conducive to the attainment of those and other learning goals.

Belonging as a valued classroom member may be problematic for children with identifiable impairments such as Down Syndrome (DS) as peers may not always know how to respond (Biklen, 1985; Rietveld, 2002; 2006) and both historical and current organisational structures may interfere with the development of effective relationships (Philips, 1997; Rietveld, 2002). Educators, professionals, and others involved with the school community including children may have particular beliefs leading to certain actions (intentionally or unintentionally) that undermine the process of their belonging as integral valued members. For instance, if teachers view inclusion as assimilation into existing norms and promote a curriculum that does not take into account the child's impairment or other significant differences, peers may

view a child with DS who cannot complete the day's printing tasks or speak clearly at news-time as an oddity, failure and not belonging as 'one of us' (e.g. Rietveld, 2002; Whiting & Young, 1996). On the other hand, where classroom norms reflect diverse ways for children to be competent and teachers respond to classmates' concerns about the child and interpret unconventional behaviour in a way that is valuing and meaningful, then peers experience a process that supports shared connections (Kliewer, 1998; Rex, 1999), which is facilitative of authentic inclusion. Teachers therefore have a significant influence in how they promote a sense of belonging for all children.

When young children openly comment about differences they notice in a classmate with DS, the issue of how teachers respond will affect what they learn about differences and consequently how they may include the child. Given that young children have difficulty understanding impairments, particularly an intellectual impairment (often distorting the nature of another's impairment (Diamond & Kensinger, 2002; Lewis, 1995), the quality of feedback/interaction experienced would seem to be critical. Teachers' responses have the potential to not only communicate pertinent information about specific impairments, but their tone and affect will convey particular values and attitudes about the child with impairment.

The aim of the present study is to examine how teachers and teacher-aides in classrooms promoted the belonging of three boys with DS to the jointly-created peer and teacher culture in their classrooms. Teachers are forced to confront this issue when children with an identifiable impairment such as DS enter a regular setting and peers either explicitly ask about or comment upon differences and anomalies they notice, or observe peers talking about the child's differences or engaging in negative non-verbal behaviours. The data are drawn from a larger study examining the transition from preschool to school for three boys with DS, aged 5-6 years (Rietveld, 2002). Two boys attended their local regular schools (Ian and Jonathan), while Mark attended a non-local school<sup>1</sup> where he spent time in both integrated and special classes. A teacher-aide was present in each classroom from around 1 to 3 hours per day. Data were obtained on each boy and his contexts during the last month of

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<sup>1</sup> This was not the parents' preferred choice. Mark had been rejected at several local schools.

preschool, the transition to school visits and throughout the first term of school (3-4 months).

## **PROCEDURE**

The first task involved identifying from the running record data, all episodes where;

a) peers commented openly to the teacher or teacher-aide about the child's appearance, his immature performance or engagement in immature or unconventional behaviour, b) peers commented to each other about any of the above, c) peers engaged in non-verbal actions pertaining to the child's behaviour (e.g. smiling to each other, laughing at child, sniggering) while pointing to or looking at child and d) the teacher or teacher-aide was present and most likely heard the comment. All episodes where it was doubtful that the teacher or teacher-aide heard the comment or saw the behaviour concerning the child with DS were omitted from this analysis.

The rationale for studying inclusion from the "bottom-up" instead of "theory-down" is that according to Mehan (1992; 1998) the only possible way of gaining a deeper understanding of the processes such as inclusion is to investigate their operation in situations where they are generated (e.g. the classroom). The most basic unit for examining such processes is in face-to-face interactions, as these constitute sites where processes such as inequality, competence and disability are constructed and either maintained or reconceptualized.

## **RESULTS**

There were three types (categories) of teacher/teacher-aide responses to peer comments or spontaneous non-verbal reactions concerning the child with DS's appearance, immature performance or engagement in immature/unconventional behaviour. These were:

- i) Ignores,
- ii) Responds directly to child with DS; colludes with peers' deficit interpretations, or
- iii) Reframes by focussing on the social context

In the following section, the subcategories comprising each category with examples from the raw data follow and the implications will be outlined.

### **i) Ignores**

No Response: There were incidents where the teacher ignored the children's comments regarding the perceived deviancy of the child with DS. For instance, when all the class were on the mat ready to attend to the teacher, Gerard called out, "He (Jonathan) talks funny. So does Matthew" (another child in the class with an impairment). The teacher proceeded with the explicit curriculum. A variation of complete ignoring was the teacher overtly silencing such comments. When on another occasion, Gerard called out, "Matthew's a pest and so is Jonathan" the teacher responded by saying, "Shsh".

Sometimes, the child with DS was slower in responding or learning the classroom expectations and peers took over the task by, for instance, taking the book out of the child's hands and returning it to the shelf. In the following incident, Jonathan still held a ball in his hand after recess, whilst the expectation was that he return it to the appropriate place and sit on the mat. Stephen who looked at Jonathan with an angry face intervened and snatched the ball out of his hands, then boasted to the teacher-aide, "I snatched the ball of [*sic*] him". The teacher-aide ignored the behaviour and comment.

Non-verbal responses that were not responded to by the teacher or teacher-aide included: peers peering intensely at the child's face and tapping his cheeks, peers looking puzzled when the child failed to answer a basic question (e.g. "Have you got a big brother in this school?") and sniggering/laughing at the child's unconventional but not inappropriate question when for instance, the class was seated on the mat and Jonathan called out to a child returning to the room, "Toilet"? [Have you been out to the toilet?]

By ignoring classmates' reactions to the child with DS, the children were learning implicitly that the kinds of differences they noticed were shameful and therefore should not be noticed or discussed. Their perceptions of the child as 'oddity' (not one of us) remained, as teachers provided no new information/experiences within the children's zones of proximal development to challenge their thinking. Clearly, the children's deficit thinking or uncertainty about the child was hindering the

development of any meaningful mutually reciprocal relationships necessary for facilitative inclusion as their understandings were fixed on a single characteristic (the child's unconventional behaviour) which was viewed as all-encompassing and hindered them from seeing other aspects of the child. When teachers ignored peers defining the child with DS by his impairment, they learnt that this 'othering' was acceptable behaviour that legitimised their excluding him or treating him abusively such as when Stephen boasted to the teacher-aide about snatching Jonathan's ball.

Ignores question content: There were also incidents where the teacher or teacher-aide did respond, but ignored the actual content of the question, thus not facilitating the peer's understanding of the differences he/she noticed. One lunchtime, when Mark was in the sandpit (an area shared by all the junior classes – special and integrated), a child from one of the integrated classes who had not seen Mark before peered at him, then asked the nearby teacher-aide, "Who's he? What does he look like?" The teacher-aide responded firmly, "What do you mean, what does he look like? He looks like Mark". The peer looks again, then leaves.

Ignores message content: The final subcategory of ignoring involved the teacher or teacher-aide diverting the peer's attention from the content of his/her message, thus ignoring it by legitimising the child's behaviour even when it contravened the classroom rules (the social context for enabling/hindering inclusion). For instance, a firm rule in Jonathan's class was that after completing any written work, the children were only allowed to sit on the mat to read a book. When Jonathan did not select a book, but a pegboard and proceeded to make a pattern, a peer (Simon) alerted the teacher-aide by casting him in the role of 'outsider' (naughty boy). "He's a naughty boy". The teacher-aide ignored the peer's judgement by attempting to construct Jonathan in a more positive light. "He's being very good boy – making a lovely pattern". In this situation, the teacher-aide avoids or ignores any response to Simon's justifiable outrage by avoiding the issue of difference. Simon cannot believe that Jonathan is an integral and valued member of the class when he is encouraged and reinforced for following a completely different set of rules. Knowing that the teacher is likely to chastise children who do not follow the rules, Simon inevitably sees Jonathan as 'not one of us' ("a naughty boy"). No shared meanings can develop between the pair as no legitimate reason about his difference and why he is not



required to engage in the prescribed task is provided, nor fertile ground created whereby the pair might engage in the prescribed task in a mutually satisfying way. The wider issue of classroom rules that do not take into account differing student's diversities is clearly also ignored.

## **ii) Responds Directly To Child With DS: Colludes With Peers' Deficit**

### **Interpretations**

There were instances where peers drew attention to the child with DS's immature/unconventional behaviour and the teacher responded by focussing only on the child, thus ignoring the social context (for instance, by failing to interpret the behaviour or support peers in their direct interaction with the child). An example of this category involved Jonathan failing to comply with a simple command addressed to the class such as "Put your book away" and a typically developing child calling out to the teacher, "He's still got his" (book) and the teacher interrupting instruction, walking over to Jonathan and ensuring he complied with the instruction. Other incidents included peers calling out when the child with DS failed to comply with both implicit and explicit class rules, such as starting to eat lunch before permitted, engaging in the wrong activity, sitting at the wrong desk and touching items on a display table. In these situations, the teacher immediately attended to the child with DS thereby colluding with the children and creating a divisive culture of the teacher and the majority of 'rule-keepers' who provided surveillance for a minority of students (usually children with impairments and those from different ethnic backgrounds) who did not meet the specified norms. By colluding with the children's deficit interpretations, classmates were being denied opportunities for reframing the child whom they assigned deficit status, as a valued and integral classroom member (one of us).

Peers sometimes included the child with DS as an oddity or object of ridicule in response to his unconventional behaviour. In this role, they did not interact directly with the child with DS, but summoned a teacher-aide to deal with the 'problem'. They ridiculed him, talked about and laughed at him, suggesting that they framed the child presumably on account of his differences as an undesirable 'other' (not like us).

There are three typically developing boys present with Mark at the construction activity (Clever sticks) during developmental time. The teacher-aide explains

and shows Mark how the sticks join together, then leaves. Mark reaches over and takes out some sticks, which he puts beside him. He tries to lock some together before reaching over and tipping out the contents of the whole box. One of the boys comments, "Oh Mark!" James calls out to the teacher-aide, "Mrs B, Mrs B, oh look! Mark tipped them all out." Mark starts putting them back in the box. James laughs and says to the other boy, "He's (Mark) putting them back in." The boy says, "Yeah" and laughs too. Both boys look at Mark and continue laughing at him as the teacher-aide helps Mark put some sticks away and use some for building.

In this scenario, the teacher's response is to ignore the source of Mark's difference, thus allowing the boys to continue including him in their superficial way and thereby not engaging them in a more facilitative process conducive to a more mutually-satisfying relationship.

Physical Removal: The final subcategory, which focussed on the child, involved the teacher or teacher-aide removing the child from his typically developing peers and positioning him with another child with an impairment. An instance of this occurred when Mark experienced considerable harassment from his peers and while the teacher-aide did not see all of it, she did witness the latter half and responded by taking Mark away and positioning him alongside another child with an impairment.

Mark is in the playground standing and looking around. James comes up to Mark.

James: Hello, hello, hello. [James gets very close to Mark's face.]

Mark: No

[James goes to a nearby friend in the adventure playground.]

James: Look at that boy (Mark) there. He said 'No'. Come and have a look. He goes like this with his tongue.

[James imitates putting his tongue in and out of his mouth. James pokes his tongue out at Mark. Mark walks off a little, watching other children play.

James returns with another two boys as well as the first boy.]

Boys: Hello, hello, hello.

[The boys say 'hello' to him over and over and laugh at him. One of the boys throws his screwed-up lunchpaper at Mark. Mark looks at the ground and shakes his head. Peter squeals at him and pats his cheeks. The others make growling noises at him then laugh. The boys leave for a minute, then return saying 'Hello' to Mark over and over. Mark pokes his tongue out at the boys.]

A teacher-aide walks by.

TA: I hope you boys are being nice.

James: We're just saying 'Hello' to him...

[The teacher-aide introduces Mark to the boys and suggests that they play with Mark. They ask Mark if he wants a swing. Mark does not respond. The boys leave and Mark stands on the path looking around.]

TA: Come on. [The teacher-aide holds her hand out to Mark.] We'll find William (another child with an impairment the teacher-aide is there to support.) Mark follows the teacher-aide to the adventure playground.

Mark's difference was the focus of James' attention and resulted in increasing levels of socially inappropriate behaviour towards him. Whilst it is acknowledged that the teacher-aide did not witness the entire episode and attempted to mitigate the situation by encouraging the boys to be friendly, Mark understandably did not want to be involved with them after their harassment. She resolved the issue by providing physical comfort to Mark by holding out her hand and suggesting he play with a classmate who also has an intellectual impairment. By the teacher-aide colluding with the peers who were abusive to Mark and viewing him as 'not like us', she uses the situation to reinforce to all concerned that Mark needs protection by positioning him with 'his own kind' (children with intellectual impairments) as opposed to providing his peers with an opportunity to learn how to relate to someone with an impairment.

### **iii) Reframes by Focussing on Social Context**

In this final category, teachers responded to issues peers raised concerning the child's identifiable differences by creating a social context supportive of and valuing of the diversity. Classmates' spontaneous reactions (verbal or non-verbal) became a valued integral component of the educational discourse, irrespective of what area of the explicit curriculum was in operation at the time.

For instance, when a classmate observed Ian jumping instead of hopping on the hopscotch during lunchtime, she asked the nearby teacher-aide, "Why is he doing that?" to which the teacher-aide replied, "Because he's not really sure how to hop on one leg yet".

By teachers and teacher-aides providing a context where they responded to puzzled looks and answered questions as they arose openly, warmly and factually, they

conveyed to the children that differences are ordinary, expected and valued and that it is permissible to notice and talk about them.

Another strategy teachers used was by interpreting the likely intent of the behaviour in a positive and valuing manner. During one of Ian's first pre-entry visits when his mother and younger sibling were present, a classmate called out to the teacher "Look what Ian's doing" when he removed 2 chairs from the desks and took them over to his mother and younger sibling during singing time. Ian's teacher calmly responded, "Yes, Ian's Mum can now sit on a chair". The teacher thus taught the children to figure out the likely intent of the behaviour. When children have access to plausible explanations of their experiences within the context of a nurturing and supportive relationship, shared meanings are developed which form the foundation of cognitive thought (Rogoff, 1990).

The teachers who focussed on the social context also challenged children's interpretations if they were demeaning and interrupted inappropriate social behaviour whilst providing guidelines on how to interact. In one incident, Stephen complained to the teacher-aide (from his early intervention programme who was present during his first week of school) that Jonathan said, something non-sensical, but she challenged his interpretation.

Stephen: "He (Jonathan) said, 'Don't chick me'".

Teacher-Aide: "No, he said that he doesn't want you to hurt him. You need to listen to what he is saying very carefully. He has a very quiet voice."

Another pedagogical tool involved the teacher reframing the children's interpretation of events from a focus on Ian's deficits to the collective responsibility of the group and what they needed to do to continue their inclusive play.

A small group of children including Ian were engaged in block play during 'Choosing Time'. Ian added some more cars to the block building, which caused the structure to partly collapse. After telling Ian not to add more blocks ("Ian! No, Ian") and Ian continuing to do so, Alan tells the teacher and she arrives at the scene. She arrives and assesses the situation.

Teacher [To Alan] If there's a problem, tell Ian what it is. Tell Ian if there's too many cars, it'll [the block structure] break. Tell him where he can put the cars and blocks

[Alan and Ian sit down on the mat. Ian picks up a car]

Alan [To Ian] In there. In there. [Alan shows Ian where to put the car]  
Ian: No [Ian says 'No' but does put the car where Alan showed him and drives it around. Brent, Alan and Kate also drive their cars around each on their own part of the block structure for the next 2 minutes.

In this scenario, the teacher supported all and thus helped maintain the group's inclusion. She helped Ian's peers in problem-solving by not focussing on his limitations, but on utilising their strengths in communication to help Ian learn why his actions caused a problem and hence avoid a potential breakdown in the play. She explained how they should interact with Ian appropriately to give him feedback and help him to learn and use appropriate building skills. Through such support, Ian's classmates were learning ways of including Ian that they could generalise to other contexts.

A final strategy which focussed on the social context involved the teacher explaining the child with DS' behaviour to the peer and interpreting the peer's intention to the child with DS at the time of the incident, but also raising the issue as part of a brief classroom discussion that focussed on general social issues (e.g. the importance of sharing things and welcoming newcomers) and an arena for children to voice their issues (about anything). A recurring theme during Ian's pre-entry visits had been his hitting of classmates who initiated genuinely benign interactions with him. Within the context of welcoming three new children including Ian, the teacher raised the issue, "... Today Alex was being a friend to Ian, but Ian didn't understand that very well...Don't get upset if he doesn't understand the first time. He doesn't always understand as quickly as you do. ...If he does something, you don't like, you could say, 'Please Ian, I don't like that but let's do this'. You can think of something that you both like.....He's very good at some things. He can read books....." to which a child added, "He can do really big kicks" (with the soccer ball). The teacher asked if anyone wished to say anything more. There was no response (which might suggest it was not a major issue) until eventually a child asked, "Are we going to do printing?"

In this way, Ian was positioned as a valued class member (one-of-us). At the same time, the impact of his impairment was not ignored, but explained as an integral part of his being and as part of the educational discourse. The teacher sought to explain Ian's apparent anti-social behaviour in order to minimise the risk of children

excluding him on account of this and she provided a tool (focussing on his strengths and joint interests) to maximise their inclusion of him.

### **Impact of Teacher and Teacher-Aide Responses**

In terms of how the children with DS experienced inclusion and how their classmates included them, the ways teachers and teacher-aides responded to issues concerning the child with DS's differences affected educational outcomes.

### Comparison of Learned Practices (Children's Behaviour) with Two Types of Teacher Responses

Once the range of teacher/aide responses to the children's spontaneous reactions had been established, comparisons among the three different classroom "cultures" took place. In Jonathan and Mark's classrooms, teachers consistently ignored issues peers raised concerning the child with DS or colluded with the children's 'deficit' interpretations of the child. In contrast, Ian's teacher and teacher-aide almost always responded to peer concerns in a way that provided them with information to maximise their inclusion of one another.

In the two settings where the teachers and teacher-aides ignored the children's comments, questions and behaviours or they colluded with the children's 'deficit' constructions of the child, their questions, comments and reactions increased and the boys with DS became increasingly marginalised and excluded. In contrast, the most striking outcome for the children whose teacher and teacher-aide focussed on the social context by providing meaningful information and strategies that positioned Ian as an insider, was that after the first few days, the children asked fewer questions publicly and they interacted with Ian in increasingly supportive ways. By the end of the observation period, there were no more public questions/comments or non-verbal reactions suggesting concerns about Ian's differences. It seemed likely that the children viewed his 'differences' as ordinary.

### What Might we Learn from these Contrasting Settings?

#### ***Quality of Relationships:***

Ignoring children's spontaneous reactions to the differences associated with the child's DS or teachers colluding with their 'deficit' framing of the child (e.g. by

publicly reinforcing the rules to the child with DS when a classmate draws the teacher's attention to the child's 'shortcomings') led to peers taking their concerns underground by incorporating them into their peer culture and discussing their evaluations of the child privately. For example, messages conveyed directly to the child with DS in a deficit-oriented setting included, "You're a naughty boy", "You're silly" and "Dummy". In addition, when Jonathan did not hear instructions to move on to the next reading activity, peers said to each other,

Michael – Neil, "Look at Jonathan" (still at the previous activity). Neil – Michael, "He's (Jonathan) a naughty boy, isn't he?" Michael – Neil, "Yeah".

In the absence of any reframing of these beliefs by more competent others (teachers and/or teacher-aides), peers reinforced one another for viewing the child's differences as all-encompassing, deviant characteristics and they also added interpretations. So,

A peer called out, "Look at Jonathan" (who is not sitting up straight). Another peer responded. "Well, he's just like a handicapped because my [older] sister said" (implying that he is not one of us).

Furthermore, if unchecked, the underground nature of the peer culture can lead to increased marginalisation of the child. One classmate in Jonathan's class was so perturbed by Jonathan's differences that she spent an entire morning-tea break towards the end of the observation period (3 months after his school entry) drumming up support from her classmates for a meeting to discuss Jonathan. When I asked her what she was doing she reported, "We need a meeting at our house about Jonathan. We want to find out why he's doing it...He does wrong things he's not allowed to..."

In contrast to the behaviour of Mark and Jonathan's peers, Ian's peers were never observed discussing Ian's differences privately after his first day. This is not to say that they did not notice any differences as interviews with the children revealed that they did. However, any differences were not viewed as all-encompassing, static characteristics, which necessitated excluding him. Differences were not preoccupying or seen as constituting the whole person so when I asked Philip to list his best friends, he said,

"Alex and Matthew and Ian"...He (Ian) runs...if I kick the ball, he runs like this (demonstrates a more immature way of running)...Sometimes he do [*sic*] really big kicks now".

At times, the children were also observed interacting with Ian directly about his differences in a supportive and valuing way. Ian's way of jumping as opposed to hopping on the hopscotch became a new norm for the class and Ian's friend, Keri ensured Ian received the credit for instigating this way of playing the game. On an occasion when Ian was watching her jump on the hopscotch, she affirmed him by saying, "This is your way, isn't it?" No such affirmations of Mark or Jonathan's diverse contributions were ever recognised by their classmates.

### ***Explicit Curriculum Learning:***

Being included in interactions as a preferred task partner or friend meant that children were not focussed exclusively on Ian's differences or unconventional behaviour. Instead, they provided a supportive learning context as they included him in the same range of relationships and roles as their peers. These emotional connections provided additional features facilitative of learning the explicit curriculum that were denied the other two boys whose relationships were dominated by brief interchanges, often of an exclusionary nature that focussed on the nature of the relationship rather than the explicit curriculum or mutually-chosen activity (e.g. ball game, book, eating lunch together). The following two examples reflecting the nature of peer relationships in two different classrooms provide a detailed description of how peer interactions either supported or hindered learning in each respective setting.

In the school library, the teacher asks Elliot to help Ian find a book. The pair walks to the shelf together. Ian selects a book about dinosaurs and hands it to Elliot. Both smile at each other. The teacher asks the boys to look at it together. They sit next to each other with the book in the middle, pointing to the various pictures and smiling and laughing about the content. [I cannot get close enough to hear the exact interactions, but I hear the pair exchange isolated words (Ian) and phrases/sentences (Elliot) concerning the names of the various dinosaurs and their characteristics e.g. sharp teeth]. Later on Ian takes out the library card and fiddles with it. Elliot says to him, "It stays there" and helps him put it back. Elliot refocusses the interaction on the book's content and they continue sharing the book.

As can be seen, Ian and his friend (Elliot) engage in reciprocal interactions where the shared focus is the learning task (sharing a text). Elliot's more mature level of speech provides Ian with advanced modelling of communicating through language. Ian's interest in and knowledge of the dinosaur's names provides Elliot with information about his competencies, which provide a basis for shared understandings, thus enabling the interaction to proceed. Elliot has learnt how to respect differences and



avert a potential breakdown (when Ian changes focus from the content of the book to the library card) by providing constructive feedback as opposed to a critical comment about Ian's deviancy. Through being included in a mutually reciprocal supportive relationship involving physical proximity, the social interactions Ian experiences with Elliot (and other classmates at other times) communicate feelings of competence and valuing as both an individual and learner. This enables him to experience non-verbal and verbal communication language content and structures, emotional interactive responses, mutuality and sustained attention, facilitative of higher-order processing, which provide the basis of mutual scaffolding to higher forms of thinking (Vygotsky, 1981).

In contrast is the following excerpt from Jonathan's class where the focus remains the nature of the relationship (Jonathan's deviancy), which peers use to separate him from them. The task is similar to the one above in Ian's classroom (silent reading which children can do alone or with a partner).

Instead of sitting on the mat, to read his book, Jonathan sits on the teacher's chair, and 'reads' his blown-up book, which the teacher read to the class earlier in the day. He points to and names some of the pictures. Michael says to George, "Jonathan's not sitting on the mat. He's sitting on the teacher's chair. Michael then says to Jonathan, "You're not allowed to sit on the teacher's chair. You're not allowed to read that" (blown-up book). When finished, Jonathan picks up a regular size book, one that was lying on the floor between him and Hamish. Apparently, Hamish had claimed this book (although this was not obvious), as he had actually selected and was reading another book. Hamish says to Michael, "Jonathan took my book off me". Hamish tries to take (pull) the book from Jonathan. Jonathan resists.

As can be seen, peers use Jonathan's unconventional, but not inappropriate behaviour as a basis for adopting a superior position to him. The focus remains on his 'deviancy', which excludes him from processes supporting his literacy development and conveys to him that he is an undesirable and an incompetent member of the class, thus invalidating his self-worth. These messages conveyed through physical distance (no-one sharing in his choice of book or being invited to share someone else's), verbal content (only messages concerning his deviancy), unresponsive emotional and social responses, being treated like an object (having his book taken off him without any negotiation) reinforced his exclusion which hindered his potential to access higher

levels of mental processes that depend on supportive interactions with more skilled partners (Rogoff, 1990; Vygostky, 1981).

Implications of the two contrasting settings are that when the teachers focussed on creating shared meanings concerning Ian's (and others') diverse characteristics and gave children access to processes to understand issues that arose, children were observed engaging in their own problem-solving that focussed on the central aspect(s) of the learning task. For instance, when Ian was not attending during reading instruction, his friend, Philip motivated him by saying, "Do you want a stamp?" to which Ian replied, "Yeah". Philip then said to Ian, "Well, you read good". Ian promptly refocussed on his reading task. The children also regularly interpreted Ian's unconventional behaviour and responded appropriately, providing him with the information and cues that he needed to be a valued member. For instance, when he went outside one morning break during heavy rain, his neighbouring classmate/friend ran out and explained that it was too wet to play outside. He came in with her and the pair sat on the couch by the window watching the rain as they ate their morning tea. In contrast, in Mark and Jonathan's contexts, the children continued to be dependent on the teacher or teacher-aide attending to the child with DS when they failed to understand these boys' differences in appearance, movement and behaviour, which inadvertently hindered their own relationships with these boys.

Finally, in terms of academic outcomes, in Ian's classroom where factors related to Ian's (and other children's identities) became an integral part of the educational discourse, Ian also experienced significant social and academic gains. He was part of a peer group, friendships extended to out-of school visits and visible gains were achieved in reading and printing. In contrast, in the other two settings, where teachers ignored or colluded with classmates' deficit constructions of the child with DS, both boys were socially excluded and neither made any visible academic gains.

## **DISCUSSION**

While this paper focussed on the classroom contexts of only three children with DS, which necessarily limits the generalisability of the findings and in addition it focussed on a single aspect of their and their classmates' educational experiences, some pertinent learnings may still be drawn from the data.

This study investigated the relationship between teacher responses to children's awareness of differences in children with DS and the impact thereof on children's relationships and learning. This is an important issue, given that teachers are forced to confront this issue when a child with an identifiable difference enrolls in their classroom and the consequences of their actions have ramifications for i) the child's identity, ii) what peers learn about differences – whether this is enabling or disabling, iii) the extent to which peers can form relationships and hence include the child, which consequently impacts on iv) the child's learning of the explicit curriculum. For educational inclusion, teachers need to address aspects of the hidden curriculum such as how they position children with intellectual impairments or members from minority cultures.

In this study, how the teachers dealt with this issue was very consistent with their discourses of diversity, disability and inclusion and their self-awareness of these discourses. The teachers and teacher-aides who viewed inclusion as assimilation generally ignored comments while the teachers who valued diversity and understood the interplay between biological and contextual factors in relation to the child with DS's inclusion used these opportunities to establish shared meanings about the issues raised. Research on teacher education (e.g. Timperley, 2004) highlights the value of teacher reflexivity in heightening teacher awareness to enhance learning outcomes. In relation to children with intellectual impairments, teachers and their students would benefit from teachers asking themselves questions such as, "How am I positioning the child with an impairment (and/or other individuals?), What are my beliefs about this child? Are they enabling or disabling and what are the children learning from the way I respond to this child and their classmates' concerns about her/him?"

Teachers and parents often worry about the kind of attention a child with an impairment might receive in an inclusive setting and stress the importance of not focussing on the impairment (Hamilton, 2005; Rietveld, 2006), in their desire for the child to be "treated the same as everyone else." However, as is evident in Mark and Jonathan's contexts, when teachers failed to acknowledge the impact of their impairments children's concerns about the child's differences were heightened to such an extent that the children were unable to establish any inter-subjectivity and hence see any commonalities. Furthermore, a denial of the child's impairment and its

impact on functioning by teachers actually resulted in the child experiencing a less rich academic and social environment than many of their typically developing classmates or the other child with DS (Ian) whose teachers facilitated shared meanings about the impact of his impairment. Ian's school reflected authentic inclusion because according to Slee (2002), the educational discourse included "the language of the politics of recognition and representation" (p. 113). This was evident by the way the teacher and teacher-aide always positioned Ian as 'one-of us' and responded to children's awareness about Ian's differences supportively with pertinent explanations and strategies. Ian's (and other children's) differences featured as an integral and valued part of the educational landscape. The finding that children's differences be acknowledged and valued in ways that facilitate their learning and access to the curriculum is supported not only by this study but also by Cullen (1999) and McArthur, Purdue & Ballard (2003).

Ignoring the impact of children's impairments is problematic, as children with identifiable impairments such as DS cannot become integral members of classrooms, develop healthy self-esteem and maximise their learning potential if they must ignore aspects of their identity and subscribe to a majority culture that devalues their appearance and ways of thinking, being and moving. In addition, ignoring the impact of the child's impairment-related differences deprives peers from constructive ways of relating to the child so that they learn to accept, respond to (if appropriate) and see beyond the differences to other aspects they may have in common. Such processes are critical if children with DS are to be authentically included (Rietveld, 2002). Like gender and race, DS is an integral part of who children are. If children are passively or actively excluded on the basis of characteristics they cannot change, then their self-esteem will be negatively affected. Therefore teachers not only need to promote positive and meaningful relationships among classmates but also intervene directly when children are actively excluded on account of characteristics integral to their being. As well as these aspects being incorporated into teacher training programmes, it would seem essential that professionals with a background in inclusive education alert teachers to these issues in an ongoing manner. A central aim of inclusion is to promote greater acceptance and tolerance of diversity (Minister of Disability Issues, 2001). This requires teachers identifying the kinds of skills, attitudes and behaviours that would enable 5-6 year olds to make gains towards this objective and providing

the appropriate scaffolding within their zones of proximal development to promote the development of more mature relationships.

It is of some concern to note that despite the increased attention devoted to the value of listening to children's voices and their perspectives (Jones, 2005; Smith, 1996; 2005) and a growing recognition that children's meanings need to be taken into account if educators are to fully support their learning (Dahl, 1995; Nuthall, 2001) that in two classrooms, children's voices concerning differences regarding a classmate with DS were constantly silenced. In a recent article concerning 'Inclusion in the Early Years', Clough and Nutbrown (2005) argue, "only when children's perspectives are understood, can an education system be truly inclusive" (p. 101). The data in Ian's classroom would support this. Only when the children could make sense out of Ian's differences (through information and support from the teacher) were they able to see the differences as ordinary, share commonalities and develop more mature relationships.

The New Zealand Schooling Strategy (2005) views an important co-requisite to learning is that "the identities and experiences they (all students) bring to school are affirmed" (p. 9). Clearly in relation to the intellectual impairment (DS), such affirmation occurred in only one out of the three settings. This aspect has also been identified as a barrier to learning in other studies (Hamilton, 2005; Hulston, 2000). Children with DS cannot take on the role of learner if their differences are not understood, valued, or catered for. After all, it is hardly valuing another person if we ignore, do not understand or shun aspects of their identity and functioning.

The data do not support the belief that young children will not notice any differences if teachers ignore them and focus on the common curriculum. What actually occurred was that their concerns about the child's differences intensified resulting in increased marginalisation of the child, that actually interfered with their ability to focus on commonalities. An implication of this might be that teachers need greater information concerning conceptualising diversity and the theory underlying inclusion and what this might mean in practice. The idea that one theory of inclusion addresses all aspects of the inclusive experience for children is problematic, however. While the teachers in the two deficit-oriented classrooms clearly adhered to the personal

tragedy or deficit model of disability (Oliver, 1986), more recently trained teachers often experience the social model of disability (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999). Both models have their limitations which teachers might not be aware of, in relation to how they might respond in an informed way to children's concerns about a classmate's impairment. First, as the data indicated, the deficit model adherents perpetuate children's constructions of the child as deviant and second, teachers tend to interpret the social model of disability as meaning that any focus on an individual is 'medical' or 'deficit' thinking because "real barriers have to be constructed socially" (MacKay, 2002, p. 160). The problem with applying the social model unequivocally to children with biological impairments such as DS is that it ignores the very real impact of the neurological consequences on functioning (for further details, see Capone, 2004; Goodman & Linn, 2003). Clearly, some of the biological consequences of the child's impairment (manifest in the form of differences in appearance, behaviour and movement) were evident to the 5 and 6-year old classmates of all of the children with DS in this study. Yet when the adults failed to notice, or they noticed but ignored or viewed the child as deviant (as occurred in two classrooms in this study), social and academic outcomes for the children concerned were compromised, unlike in the other classroom where the impact of the child's impairment was explained and formed an integral component of the educational discourse. The data thus allude to a significant shortcoming in total acceptance of the social model of disability as its non-holistic nature fails to take into account all aspects of the child's experiences, which necessarily impacts on their quality of inclusion. How the child with DS experiences and interacts with his environment is necessarily affected by neurological processes, which differ in some ways from typically developing children. Without access to information and processes, unconventional behaviour and appearances can be disconcerting to peers and interfere with the development of genuine relationships (inclusion). The implication of this is that if pre-service teachers are not encouraged to critique as well as ascertain the strengths of the social model of disability, they may perpetuate classroom cultures that serve to separate rather than include children with impairments as critical aspects of their and their classmates' experiences of them will be overlooked.

Conclusion: This study has highlighted the impact of teachers' (teacher and teacher-aides) responses to children's comments about classmates with DS. The most

pertinent finding is that where teachers ignore or collude with children's deviant constructions of the child, the data suggest that children's understandings are likely to remain, additional misinformation may be incorporated and both form an integral component of the peer culture where the child's marginalisation is strengthened. Where teachers respond to queries or non-verbal behaviours relating to differences by explaining the differences and providing strategies to include the child as a valued member, children are able to look beyond the impairment and include the child in the same range of relationships as their peers. Academic learning outcomes were non-existent when the child was marginalised, but were evident when the child belonged as a valued member. The data would indicate that inclusion requires an expansion of roles traditionally required of teachers and that attending to the quality of social relationships is necessary for quality learning outcomes to accrue. The data are congruent with Vygotsky's (1978, 1981) theory that the core of cognitive activity evolves from participation within safe, trusting, mutually reciprocal relationships with more skilled others. The inclusive classroom therefore has much to offer a child with an intellectual impairment such as DS, given the abundance of 'more skilled others' in comparison to special settings containing only children with impairments. However, unless peers are provided with processes to form mutually reciprocal relationships with the child, they may actually be fulfilling the role of a disabling barrier to the child's learning. At the same time, they will be missing out on learning essential skills necessary for living and working in an increasingly diverse society. Teachers and those professionals supporting teachers therefore have a vital role to play in addressing this issue. If the vision for New Zealand's non-disabling society is "A society that highly values our (disabled people) lives and continually enhances our full participation (Minister of Disability Issues, 2001), the data from two out of the three schools would suggest that the processes occurring are counter-productive to that goal and therefore need urgent attention.

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